

Norton and Regional Members Uncover Flaws with DHS- June 15, 2006

Norton and Regional Members Uncover Flaws at
Hearing on DHS Formula that Caused Big Cuts Here

June 15, 2006 Washington, DC—Today at a Government Reform hearing on Department of Homeland Security (DHS) cuts here, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) told DHS Undersecretary for Preparedness George Foresman that his testimony showed that “the competition for security funds was exactly like a competition for education or HUD grants, indicating that the risk of an attack on the National Capital Region was woefully undervalued.” She said that, importantly, the DHS process failed to utilize the only regional coordinator paid by federal funds to help fashion the application to protect the region where virtually all of the country’s most important federal assets are located. The formula and its “inexplicable results” also came under bipartisan attack from Maryland and Virginia representatives. The Congresswoman’s statement opening the hearing follows.

This is the first of two hearings by committees on which I serve, seeking answers to the same question: How could a risk-based security formula lead to unusually large reductions in homeland security funds for Al Qaeda’s favorite targets, among them the National Capital Region, site of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and site of the Capitol located on this campus where analysts believe the plane that was brought down in Pennsylvania was headed? The Homeland Security Committee has asked the mayors of New York City and the District of Columbia to testify on this same subject next Wednesday. I have asked for a face-to-face meeting between regional officials and Department of Homeland Security headquarters staff, not only to get a greater understanding of the basis for the DHS decisions, but particularly to understand how the region is expected to meet its unique, dual obligations as officials charged with preventing and responding to attacks both for the federal government and local communities.

When the DHS grants were announced, the initial despair and bewilderment of residents and officials in this region quickly escalated to anger and outrage. The decision that was as astonishing as it was, and counterintuitive, was made with little explanation. We seek that explanation today. Regional residents and federal employees alike have admirably learned to live with higher risks than their fellow Americans, in part because of the special effort they see from regional and federal security officials and the funding that seemed to come annually. Among these residents are 200,000 federal employees from whom are drawn scores of thousands of federal employees directly charged with the principle responsibility for designing and planning the national homeland security effort.

This region ranks high as a target not only because of its almost four million residents. But unlike other targeted areas, the entire federal presence, including the nation’s priceless, iconic monuments and the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the White House and the Pentagon-- are concentrated in a few square miles in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. Although individual sites are protected by federal police and security guards, prevention and response for the region where the federal presence is located is up to local officials and first responders, not the federal government. When the Pentagon was attacked on 9/11, this federal installation was completely dependent upon the largest fire department in the region, the D.C. Fire Department, other regional fire services and the helicopter and burn unit at Washington Hospital Center, among other local emergency services. The nation learned that local officials here have a unique double responsibility for their own residents as well as for the nation’s most valuable and priceless federal assets. It is this twin responsibility that accounts for this region’s unique obligations. It is this twin responsibility that most seriously raises questions about the judgment of the Department of Homeland Security in severely cutting the region’s security funding.

Even with the funding the region has received, I have spent more time than I can say worrying that there has not been enough time or funding to staunch major and obvious vulnerabilities that mainly affect federal employees, not my own constituents. Working with appropriators, not DHS, I have gotten some but not all of the funding for ER One for Washington Hospital Center, where visitors to the Capitol and others in the region could be taken and isolated if there is a biological, chemical or other major attack in Washington. The tunnels, bridges, and Metro rail and bus system that are responsible for bringing federal workers to and from federal jobs in the District every day present major, untouched and difficult security issues, such as preventing and responding to attacks and accidents involving chemical, biological and other hazardous substances and fires from explosives in WMATA tunnels and the tunnels leading into this city. After 9/11, inadequate interoperability here should be unthinkable, but that is a work in progress that requires additional funding. Perhaps most telling, given the many federal buildings here where controversial decisions are made, is the lack of necessary equipment even for area bomb squads, not one of which has the equipment necessary to meet FEMA’s top standard.

We will hear of other vulnerabilities today, we will want to know whether they were considered when DHS funding decisions were made, and what precisely is now expected from local security officials charged with major prevention and recovery obligations in the National Capital Region. We will want to know not only because of those we represent. We will want to know because of the weighty, unique burden local security officials carry for the region where the nation’s most highly targeted assets are located.